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ORGANIZED LABOR'S ATTITUDE TOWARD CHILD LABOR

BY SAMUEL GOMPERS,
President of the American Federation of Labor.

It should be entirely superfluous for me to say that I am in hearty accord and in full sympathy with the purpose for which the National Child Labor Committee and the various committees throughout the country are organized.

To-day there is no division of opinion relative to the inadvisability and inhumanity of employing children of a young and tender age in gainful occupations. So much at least has been gained. In some sections of the country opposition is still manifested against the movement for the abolition of child labor upon the pretense that the enactment of such a law would be the encouragement of organized labor. I am not prepared to deny that. The abolition of child labor would have an influence to encourage the organization of wage-earners in those industries, but I do think also that it might be submitted to the gentlemen who interpose that as an objection, that in several of the Southern States in order to maintain what is called white supremacy laws have been enacted requiring educational qualifications to entitle the citizens to the suffrage, and it may not be inappropriate to this subject to call attention to the further fact that in the cotton industries of the South the children employed therein are the offspring of white women and white men; and that the black children go to school and receive an education. And, therefore, as a matter of fact, the very purpose of the educational qualification to entitle the citizen to the right of suffrage will inevitably result in the disenfranchisement of the future white citizen and the enfranchisement of the colored.

My honored friend, the Commissioner of Labor, anticipated the very remark I intended to make, and I am proud to be in accord with his judgment that an industry that depends for its success upon the

labor of young and innocent children is not worthy of success and ought to go down.

I am not sure that I gained a correct impression of a statement alleged to have been made here during an earlier session. If the information is incorrect, I should be most pleased to be corrected, for I do not care to proceed under a misapprehension. I have been told that at one of your meetings in this city it has been stated that the organizations of labor are insincere in their advocacy of the abolition of child labor. If anyone entertains any such thought, I desire to say that there is not a provision of law upon the statute books of any State of the Union or the statute books of any of the civilized countries, that has for its purpose the protection of the child and the health of not only children but also women that cannot be traced in some way to the efforts of the much abused organizations of labor.

It is within my recollection that the Hon. Eldridge T. Gerry, of New York, for many years active in the movement for the protection of children, came before the conventions of the Federation of Labor and said that the hope and the mainstay for the inauguration, for the enactment, and for the enforcement of child labor laws rest in the last degree upon the organizations of labor.

If there is anyone who harbors the thought that the organizations of labor are insincere in the effort to have laws passed and enforced for the protection of children, let me quote to you a statement made by a gentleman who presumably was associated with us in the effort to abolish child labor, Dr. A. H. Freiberg, of Cincinnati, president of the Ohio Child Labor Committee, in which he said: "The committee," speaking for his committee, "is not in sympathy with the movement of labor unions for increasing the age at which children may labor from fourteen to sixteen years." He then adds as a comment on it: "It is felt in the committee that the action of the unions is taken purely for the selfish motive of preventing competition and not with the idea of the child's welfare at heart."

I quote the gentleman because he charges the unions of labor with selfishness in the advocacy of the child labor laws in increasing the years to sixteen as against any opinion which may be entertained that the unions are insincere.

You should not infer from that statement that I believe that Dr. Freiberg is accurate in his charge that it is from selfish motives that the unions of labor are favorably disposed towards the abolition

of child labor, but I quoted simply to show that at least, even according to this accusation, we must necessarily be sincere in defense of our own self-interests.

I presume that there are a number of men and women in this city of ours, and in this country of ours, who are altruistic. Thank God that there is a continually growing number of men and women who act from that high purpose. But taking men and women as they are, not here and there, but the accepted view of men and women as they are, I wonder whether all the bankers and all the brokers and all the business men and all the newspaper men and all the companies have all been prompted from purposes of absolutely, purely, ideal altruism. And now as to the insinuations that are made and indulged in that labor men, from the standpoints of their own personal interests, advocate a certain policy, how is it that you find men usually who are engaged in the manufacture of certain products, universally protectionists from the viewpoint of the tariff? And, on the other hand, you will find men who are engaged in commercial pursuits simply, free traders. Is it a physiological influence that brings this about; is it physical? is it climatic? is it providential? or is it not purely selfish interest that prompts them to do or be the one or the other? And yet some people expect that the men who have only their labor power upon which to defend themselves and to support those dependent upon them that they shall govern all their actions from purely altruistic motives and purposes, surrendering everything that they possess.

We are just as good as they are—not better, but I repeat, just as good. From the earliest days of the present industrial era, as it emerged from the days of serfdom, and from the days of the introduction of the factory system, the organizations of labor have advocated the restriction of child labor. There is not a child labor law on the statute books of the United States but has been put there with the co-operation of the trade union movement. In Alabama—I think my memory serves me right—about two years ago, a law was passed, in Tennessee, Texas, and I think in Oregon, too, due entirely to the organized labor movement. I know that in Alabama where some better progress has been made than in Georgia in so far as the conception of such a law is concerned, that the American Federation of Labor sent a lady, not a wage-earner, into Alabama and into Georgia and into Florida and into Tennessee, for

the purpose of bringing about first a better feeling and better judgment and better conception among the people generally in order that a child labor law might be enacted. I know that when I mention the name of the lady you will all agree with me as to her splendid attainments and her faithful and intelligent work, Miss Irene Ashby, now Mrs. Irene Ashby-Macfadyen, and who is now in South Africa with her husband. Permit me to give just two quotations from Miss Ashby's first report which was submitted to me and which was published in our official journal, the *American Federationist*, in 1901:

"Four months ago I accepted a commission from Mr. Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, to agitate the subject of child labor with the view of getting a law on that subject through the legislature of Alabama. Although I return with the news of present defeat, I believe that my mission has helped to give another blow to that slowly dying cause of building commercial success on the ruin of little children."

At the close of that report she says:

"In resigning my commission on which Mr. Gompers acts, my regret at failure is tempered by the hope that what I have been able to do in concentrating previous interests, collecting facts which have aroused new interests, and in some degree amalgamating different forces, may not be without fruit in the near future, and that this campaign will at least have a share in the formation of another which will put an end forever to this particular blot on American civilization."

The lady tendered her resignation to me, but I am proud to say that I declined to accept it, and commissioned her to persist for several years in the work. And I may add that it was impracticable and inadvisable that Miss Ashby should appear as the representative of organized labor, for the reason that I have tried already indirectly to communicate to you, that the cotton manufacturers oppose the passage of the child labor law upon the pretense that it would encourage the organizations of labor if such a law was passed. It is needless to make any argument before the National Child Labor Committee in favor of the total abolition of child labor. We want to make this country of ours grander and greater and more beautiful than it is. Should anyone ask me, "Do you believe that we are mak-

ing progress?" I would gladly give my assent, and am proud of the progress that we are making, greater than any other country on the face of the globe.

We, organized labor, are glorifying and are glorified in the recognition of the wonderful advance that is being made and has been made. But it is not quite good enough. So long as there is an injustice done to one man, to one woman or to one child that is capable of rectification by us, so long there is work enough for us to do to try and secure the right and justice and a better condition. We want to make all our people not only politically the bright star in the diadem of nations, not only as an inspiration for political freedom, but also for industrial justice. In that work I am sure you will contribute much through the National Child Labor Committee.

There are a number of ladies and gentlemen associated both in the National Committee and in the several localities with whom I have had the honor and pleasure of working and cooperating for very many years. I hope that so long as life shall remain with me that I shall have the pleasure of still working and helping to solve this problem, and then the next problem, and then the next problem, as it shall confront us.